
Facing and Dreaming of Cancer

From My Breast Cancer Journal

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Yes, we can say I'm a nine-year survivor and a strong advocate for health reform and early detection to be made available to all women.

I haven't wanted to write in this journal for the last week or so. I work on other things—academic articles, proof my other manuscripts coming out in the next few months, think about writing thank-you cards, and then feeling too unhappy to say anything remotely sincere. Writing and seeing what I've written come into print is the activity that now causes me to walk or hop through this fire that I have to cross, somehow, even with my feet scorched from the coals. But I feel that there is something vacuous about this, even selfish and unmotherly. I am not thinking what I should: that I want to live to rejoin the conviviality of people—resume teaching, parties, gatherings. I am not thinking that I want to live to see my daughter, Alani, graduate from her private school or go to her softball games and watch the other mothers in their loose cliques bat away the flies that keep landing on their foreheads. And I am not thinking about wanting to survive in order to be with my husband, who has now reached the apex of his career, and I don't want to speak to my mother, or father, or sister. I feel cast off from people, ensconced in a kind of final silence that is its own locked syllable. It takes days to understand that I am angry and jealous of everyone else's life, and that I am needy again. I resent softball, school, teaching, card games, dinner parties, all going on schedule. I feel cut off and adrift, rudderless, an absurd Godot hobo, moving and refusing to move.

My loneliness has become neediness, and my husband, Walter, withdraws. His wish to avoid my pain is transparent; he is going through the motions, like I am, waking and sleeping at the proper times, doing the evening rituals that my daughter has come to expect, but we are estranged from the practice of living. I still hide my baldness from both of them, as if I should be ashamed of it. Lately, it has been easier to look in the mirror; I've even studied the shape of my skull, a shape I see my artist-husband Walter drawing on his Plexiglas commissions. It is difficult not to think about death—looking at myself that way, so profoundly revealed in a way that a woman is never prepared for. It seems as if I am being given a glimpse of what is truly bereft, touching, barely touching the edges of my own existence. I have become much more diffuse in my grasp of myself. A life-threatening illness has made me shy of people, and I'm hoping that I will regain my sense of relation to them, like regaining the strength in my legs.

I tell myself it will take time to come back from this self-obsessed realm of bodily suffering, time to see my husband not as the enemy for not having to go through what I'm going through. When I was going through the labor of birth, I didn't resent him for sitting painlessly beside me reading the Post, before I got the epidural. I didn't resent him when he disappeared to put more quarters in the meter, during the first chemo; at least he was there. I was a coward both times, and I'm still a coward. I want someone to be with me during the long and empty hours, the way my mother, who was a working mother, stayed home when I ran a fever. She wasn't especially good company—maybe she made dry toast for me, or played a game of casino, but she was there. Her footsteps were indelible on the carpet. She never talked much and I have cursed myself for being that way with my daughter, short on words, but long on bear hugs.

So that must be my theme, this week, through the waiting. Harsh self-criticism, balancing the worth of my life against the pain of fighting, that strange paradox of feeling that death is the absolute exile and selfishly one can prepare for it by slowly withdrawing, preparing myself not to need anyone so that when death comes I will not be missed—that is what Keats wanted, to disappear and not be missed, to be a name "writ in water."

I have come full circle. It is Friday, and the trees before my computer sway just as they have every summer, so that I realize another has already passed. The trees of course are identical to what they were. We humans don't have to make that effortless effort to become what we once were, over and over again. Walter has gone out to fetch Alani. I hear a neighborhood kid shrieking somewhere out of joy, not pain. I have not wanted to write a poem since this happened, and worry that I won't ever again. I think about my mentor and editor Jeff Berman in Albany who has stayed with me as I've flickered many times like a spent candle in a blackout. I want reasons to cross the fire and let it burn my feet, although the heat doesn't feel like anything until afterwards. This morning, in my closet, I picked up a piece of chalk that must have dropped out of one of my jacket pockets. I picked it up as if it were a foreign object. I couldn't believe that three months ago I was in a classroom, teaching. I can't believe that I was writing words on the board, words that seem so distant now, and so irretrievable.

Hope is melting but there is also relief. I am ready for stark, elemental sorrow. The way one stoically opens the door to a snowstorm and instinctually bows. I am bowing.

Maybe all of this is just about that. Trying to see literal obstacles, the fears, the dread, and the pain, as more than they are, as what will eventually send off the magnetic waves into the distance where recovery lies, some place past Peoria. I don't even know any one who lives in Peoria.

Life-threatening illness poses the most demonstrative kinds of questions anyone has to bear. On bad days, when self-pity has overrun good sense, you might well tell yourself that this world is simply borrowed and that when there could have been nothing, there was something; when there could have been no feeling at all, there was love, and that, even to our endings, never leaves us.

In the last chemo session, I experience a virtual communion with a Mexican woman who speaks almost no English. She is sitting in the chair next to me and I can see that her catheter is internal, connected by what looks like a child's necklace of plastic baubles of blue and pink and green; toys you would float into a baby pool. Sitting next to each other, while the toxins drip in, we

toss words at each other, waiting for the other's stab of recognition. She comes weekly, for a stomach cancer, and is troubled by the fact that I am cold ("frio") in the room, and can't eat. She had brought her sandwich with her—which she tolerates—biting into it, but hardly chewing, and tells me, so that I could understand, "you eat." "Comer," I think, but can't think of the verbs in their proper conjugations, can't fit an act of mine into hers, verbally, but touch her with my free hand. When the doctor comes to see her, he sits knee to knee with her as they count in a Spanish duet the months she has left in treatment, the way we recite the months in Spanish conversation classes. Only three more, she says, "tres." Looking down at my lap, I notice I have already put out three fingers, and for the first time, I breathe, with some hope for the future.

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Dreams of Cancer Patients Approaching Death

Wendy Pannier
Dream Group Leader

Dreams come to us from a very wise, supportive level of the unconscious throughout life—including as we approach death. Meaningful pre-death dreams span all religions and cultures from ancient China, India, and Greece to modern times. There are many ways dreams can help us face death and dying.

Premonition dreams have helped people avoid death. These may be premonitions of accidents that the dreamer then avoids or knows how to deal with when faced with the situation. Others have had reassuring dreams of loved ones who have already passed over. Still others have had dreams of death that deepened their spiritual